Pathologies

In the preceding chapters I presented the ideal typical development of the proletarian subject, reconstructing the ‘plot’ behind the historical ‘story’ of the workers’ movement. In actuality, however, this trajectory has all but been a smooth and ‘healthy’ process, from the normative perspective of authentic subject formation. Below I briefly sketch some of the developmental pathologies that may arise – and have risen historically – during the formation of the worker activity-system.

Iron Law of Oligarchy?

A first pathology is the historical tendency of the participants of a developed and complex activity-system to lose democratic control once its organizational structures are formed. Seeing how social-democratic trade unions and parties fell prone to the rule of small elites and cliques at the turn of the nineteenth century, the German sociologist Robert Michels (1876–1936), a student of Max Weber’s (1864–1920), fatalistically claimed that: “Who says organization, says oligarchy” (Michels 1968, 365). Hard empirical evidence of the systematic exclusion of the rank and file from the decision process in the German Socialist Party brought Michels to the theoretical conclusion that, throughout history, there was an ‘iron law of oligarchy’ at work that transformed originally democratic activity-systems into bureaucratic structures. As an explanation for this recurrent phenomenon the German sociologist invoked – in line with the rationalization thesis of his mentor Weber – the logic of class organization and mobilization, which necessitated a division of labor and relations of hierarchy and authority, and the social psychology of the masses, who desired to delegate the responsibilities of power to a group of revered leaders. Instead of a means (Mittel) to an end (Zweck), social-democratic structures became an end in themselves (Selbstzweck) for the leaders to accumulate personal power. Michels’s pessimistic perspective led him straight to elite theories as elaborated by

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1 As Vygotsky pointed out, the conception of the ‘normative’ development is constructed through the appearance of the pathological, and vice versa: “Pathology is the key to understanding development and development is the key to understand pathological changes.” (Vygotsky 1998, 152).
Vilfredo Pareto (1848–1923) and Gaetano Mosca (1858–1941), eventually joining Mussolini’s Fascist Party.

From an emancipatory perspective, there is little to gain from the determinist and fatalistic interpretation of the empirical facts of bureaucratization and elite formation. Nevertheless, Michels’s notion of Selbstzweck and the pitfalls of organization and representative politics highlights a concern shared with anarchist, Marxist, and contemporary alterglobalization thinkers. Returning to Hegel and Marx, the concept of alienation formulates the essence of the problem: the inert object of activity that is disconnected from living praxis and confronts it as something external and alien. In his densely written “Critique of Dialectical Reason,” Sartre took up the issue as the problem of the ‘anti-dialectic’ of the ‘practico-inert’. As the basic unit of human subjectness Sartre posited the ‘fused group’, an undifferentiated totality constituted by an immediate activity or praxis shared by its individual participants. Sartre conceived of the ‘fused group’ as but a fleeting, temporary force: “The fused group should [...] be characterised as an irreversible and limited process: the reshaping of human relations by man had temporalised itself in the practical context of a particular aim and as such would not survive its objectification” (Sartre 2004, 390).

Praxis, the ‘constituent dialectic’, creates a domain of worked inertia: the ‘practico-inert’, which is equivalent to Hegel’s objectification of human subjectivity. The ‘practico-inert’ represents an ‘anti-dialectic’, a ‘dialectic of passivity’, because it resists the active ‘constituent dialectic’. Whereas Blunden’s notion of project already presupposes forms of mediation (either appropriated from other activities or produced by the collaboration itself), the ‘fused group’ is primordial, undifferentiated, unmediated activity. Sartre considered tools, signs, and organizational forms as ‘worked’ activity, the ‘practico-inert’, which “comes to man from outside” (Sartre 2004, 471). When the ‘fused group’ becomes mediated it turns into an organization or institution, becoming alienated from the vitality of its ‘constituent dialectic’: “It is in the concrete and synthetic relation of the agent of the other through the mediation of the thing, and to the thing through the mediation of the other, that we shall be able to discover the foundations of all possible alienation” (Sartre 2004, 66f27).

The problem with Sartre’s approach is that his notion of alienation is derived from Hegel instead of Marx. As discussed in Chapters 3 and 5 Marx had criticized Hegel’s conflation of objectification, which was part of the human condition, with alienation. Alienation was the outcome of the historically-immanent, involuntary, and undirected cooperation between human beings who did not recognize the products of this spatially, temporally, and socially fragmented collaboration as the objectifications of their own activity. The ‘mediation of